

# Fabian's Parliamentary News

April 2009

It seems extraordinary that it is now nearly twelve years since I was elected as our Leeds North East Labour MP. During that time I have tried hard to spend as much time as possible working in the constituency and dealing with the many individual concerns of electors and communities that are brought to me and my staff every day.

I will shortly be publishing my latest Annual Report which will be sent to every household and which I hope will help all constituents understand the work that I and my team have been doing on their behalf.

During 2008, in spite of pressure from the Government Whips to spend more time in Parliament, I have ensured that I continue to keep the constituency as my top priority and have managed to be present in Leeds North East for many important events and meetings which have taken place during the week.

On June 30th last year, I relocated the Constituency Office to 335 Roundhay Road, above the shop owned by Binson Bearings. This has been a very good move as we now have far better facilities and much more space in which to see constituents and carry out work on their behalf. Almost all my work is handled from the Constituency Office and none of my staff, employed in Leeds or London, are members of my family.

## **LOCAL ISSUES: YORKSHIRE BANK PLAYING FIELDS**

Just off Shadwell Lane between the Ring Road and Marks and Spencer's is a piece of open land which had formerly been used as playing fields and was owned by Yorkshire Bank for the use of their staff. Over the years, the surrounding area was developed but the playing fields remained a very precious area of greenery in an overdeveloped suburb.

Now that Yorkshire Bank has decided that it no longer needs the playing field, it has earmarked the site for development. It's rare that proposals like this attract such universal rejection by local residents and I have worked hard to support their views, which are also my own, that no development should take place on this site. There are real problems with it, for example, Shadwell Lane is narrow and cannot take the extra traffic that 85 houses would generate. The sewage and drainage structure risks becoming overloaded and there is already flooding when storm water cannot flow away. But above all local residents would like to preserve this small area of greenery that gives them light, space and a glimpse of nature.

David Lloyd Homes, who are seeking to develop the site on behalf of Yorkshire Bank, do not seem to have given much consideration to infrastructure concerns. They didn't bother to discuss their proposals with Leeds planners, for example, before putting forward a second application after the first was rejected. I would like to see any plan-





ning application for housing on this site rejected and I will work to support the newly formed Moortown Community Association in a campaign to try and change the land into an urban park for the benefit of everyone locally. This will need money in order to purchase the land and then to keep up and develop the park as a local amenity. Perhaps a Parish Council for Moortown is one answer as it would have the power to levy a modest parish rate to fund the project. I am totally behind Moortown residents on this issue and I am pleased that all the local councillors are taking the same stance. The proposal for development must be frustrated until a strategic solution can be found.

### **LOCAL ISSUES: FLOODING IN THE WELL HOUSES**

The Gledhow Valley is a lovely relic of the countryside that once existed north of the city centre in Leeds. Even today, someone driving or walking down Gledhow Valley Road can imagine they are deep in woodland a long way away from the bustle of the city. A stream runs down the valley and is captured by a dam shortly before the junction with Roundhay Road. The dam is meant to ensure that in times of high rain there is no flooding but the outflow from the dam, used when it's full, to take off the excess water is too small and flooding occurs. The Well Houses are in the firing line and are at the bottom of the valley - residents there are understandably upset that their houses are often at risk.

I raised the plight of the Well Houses in a question to Environment Minister, Hilary Benn, on the floor of the House of Commons last December and pressed for responsibility for the drainage of Well House beck to be transferred to public responsibility under new arrangements that will come into force in 2011.

### **LOCAL ISSUES: NEW SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN LEEDS NE**

I don't know of another constituency that has benefited as much so far from the government's drive to renew all secondary schools in England. After decades of government neglect, the condition of

school buildings had become a national disgrace. Children were often condemned to being taught in old and dilapidated buildings with a dire shortage of books and equipment.

Now, all that has changed. You only have to look at the investment in computers combined with the much richer range of teaching resources that are now used to see that there has been a transformation in the way in which teachers and children work in classrooms.

Four of the five secondary schools in the constituency have been completely rebuilt. The first to be replaced was Cardinal Heenan Roman Catholic High School, shortly following which was Roundhay High School keeping just the traditional façade but adding a stunning new building which provides fabulous facilities for local pupils. Then in March 2007, Tony Blair came to open the new Carr Manor High School.

The latest school to be replaced was Allerton High, to a magnificent design that has become a flagship inspiring other projects elsewhere in the country. It was with great delight that we welcomed Gordon Brown to formally open it on the 28th November, the day the whole Cabinet met in Leeds. We've had two Prime Ministers visiting the constituency within such a short space of time but of course, the real winners are the pupils of North East Leeds who now have the chance even better education in purpose-built schools of the future.

When the new Allerton Grange High School opens this September, well over £100 Million will have been spent on the schools in this constituency alone. This is one of the best examples of the Government's commitment to education, and our children have been the beneficiaries of such far-sighted investment.

### **LOCAL ISSUES: SUPPORT TO CONSTITUENTS**

A large proportion of my time and my staff's time is spent dealing with issues raised by constituents and the number of reasons why people ask for help continues to grow. On many occasions I am



able to help, particularly in those where bureaucratic wheels have seemed to turn very slowly. It's surprising just how often a letter from the MP stirs up action and a decision is made more quickly. Typical issues that I have dealt with in the past year include:

- \* Help with housing.
- \* Antisocial behaviour / problem neighbours.
- \* Planning objections.
- \* Visa and citizenship applications.
- \* Traffic problems.
- \* Dealing with Leeds City Council
- \* Health Service issues.
- \* Policing.
- \* School admissions and exclusions.
- \* Help for elderly persons.
- \* Problems with fuel costs.

It's hard for an individual MP to change the law or alter the rules that apply and sometimes I have to explain this to people who think I should be able to fix anything immediately. However, I have been able to intervene, especially in some of the cases concerning visas and the right to remain in the UK where particular circumstances merit the use of the discretion that Ministers are able to exercise. There are many other cases where the use of Parliament to raise issues which directly affect constituents has yielded good results and resolved their problems.

### **FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

The key role of an MP is to work in Parliament, making sure that new legislation is fair and effective, holding the government to account, and scrutinising the way that policies are working in order to ensure that government institutions work efficiently. Of course, I balance this work with what I do in the constituency.

My special area of concern is the impact of British foreign policy because I serve on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee. The Committee's main role is to carefully scrutinise the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and we produce regular reports to Parliament on many different aspects foreign policy throughout the world, especially those areas that are much in the

news. I am often contacted by constituents about foreign affairs, so below is a brief analysis of some of the major areas in which the Committee has recently been involved:

**GAZA:** The conflict in Gaza provoked great outrage in many sections of our community and I received a huge number of letters and emails from constituents about it. Some were enraged by the way that Israel had been subjected to a constant bombardment of missiles from sites in the Gaza Strip, mostly launched from densely populated urban sites. Others were very angry by the way that Israel retaliated with heavy artillery, air strikes and finally the use of ground forces all of which led to heavy civilian casualties. There were some people who felt that the UK should somehow send troops to get involved on one side or the other.

I have long been a supporter of the two state solution whereby Israel is guaranteed security and peace in return for a withdrawal to its 1967 borders -the so-called 'Green Line' (with appropriate mutually agreed adjustments to take account of the realities on the ground) and the establishment of a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel. This is the essence of the Arab League Peace Plan as well as the Quartet's 'Road Map' and all agree that this is what a final peace agreement will look like. The trouble is that nobody really knows how to get there and sadly, Tony Blair has not really made much difference so far.

What is certain is that further violence will only continue to destabilise the region and cause further bitterness and extremism, on both sides. Israel has a right to live in peace within its internationally recognised borders but the Palestinians also have a right to be able to establish a free, open and democratic sovereign state in which they can live in peace and pursue prosperity for all. How soon this is likely to happen depends very much on the quality of the leadership on both sides, and my recent visit to the region, as well as the election of a right-wing Government in Israel, did not give me much hope that this is about to happen.



**IRAN:** Following my visit in late 2007, I hope that Iran will view as sincere the message from Barack Obama suggesting that better relations should be established with the USA as part of his genuine attempt to open up dialogue with the Muslim world.

Iran is a developed country with an established democracy and I am sure that the Iranian people also desire a peaceful relationship with others in their region and in the world. The danger lies in the power struggles between political factions within Iran who use war-like rhetoric to bolster their own image. President Ahmedinejad has said that Israel has no right to exist and that he wants to see it "wiped from the map". Uranium enrichment is taking place in Iran consuming vast resources when it is not strictly necessary as other countries would gladly supply the fuel needed for Iranian civil nuclear power and yet we have also just witnessed the launch of a communications satellite using rocket technology that could be used in the missiles necessary to carry a nuclear weapon. Secretary-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Dr Mohammed El-Barradei, has made it clear that he believes the Iranians are trying to conceal some elements of their nuclear power development programme and have not been entirely open with the IAEA's Inspectors.

The development of an Iranian nuclear weapon would in my view lead to regional proliferation which could precipitate a nuclear weapons exchange, and we are all aware that there is no such thing as a local nuclear war.

I am delighted that the BBC World Service, which is directly funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has set up a Persian language satellite Television channel and I sponsored its launch in the House of Commons a few months ago.

**IRAQ:** At times I never thought I would see a clear prospect to the end of British involvement in Iraq. As most people know I voted against the war in 2003, a decision I have never regretted. Now, at last there is a clear timetable for both British and US withdrawal. Finally, Iraq appears to be starting

to improve and become less violent but I remain horrified at the loss of so many innocent lives in that country. At least, however, Saddam Hussain is no longer around, so perhaps at long last the Iraqi people can begin to take control of their own lives and their own future.

**AFGHANISTAN:** Some countries in the world have tremendous advantages in terms of climate, natural resources and communications but Afghanistan is not one of them. Hundreds of miles from any coast, with no rivers that can be used for transport and surrounded by inhospitable deserts and mountains it's no wonder that there is a different culture in that country and a distrust of uninvited foreigners. After a long history of engagement, what would happen if the NATO foreign troops just left?

Firstly the Taliban, largely coming from Pakistan, would take over without the consent of the Afghan people and reintroduce an oppressive regime reducing women to mere chattels, suppressing creativity, music and culture and operating barbaric laws. Secondly the cultivation of opium would rocket. It is the only valuable natural resource in the country and needs little in the way of transport infrastructure to move it around. The drug would pour into western markets, even more than it does at present, spreading further addiction, misery, death and violent crime. Thirdly, terrorists from Al Qaeda would have a safe haven again from which to plan their fanatical mission of death and destruction on the democracies of the world.

There is no alternative but to stay in Afghanistan, build up the competency of the elected government and start to dismantle the culture of corruption. The Taliban must be persuaded either to aspire to responsible democratic government or be defeated in any way possible. That will mean the commitment of armed forces and investment in that country, building roads, power supplies and institutions. I wish there was an easy way to knock the bottom out of the drugs market. If suddenly nobody wanted to buy the stuff, the world would change for the better but I don't think that's likely any time soon.



**INDIA AND PAKISTAN:** The horror of Bombings in Mumbai threatens to destabilise the growing trust between the governments of India and Pakistan. I am pleased that caution has prevailed before wrong accusations were made over the Mumbai atrocities and I hope that India and Pakistan will work together as it is in the interest of both countries to establish the roots of terrorism and bring those guilty to justice. Slowly common sense prevails in other areas. The opening of the frontier for travel between the two sides in Kashmir was very encouraging and is bringing some relief to long divided families.

**BURMA AND ZIMBABWE:** The behaviour of the Burmese generals ruling that country and appalling abuse by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe are vivid demonstrations of the need for democracy. If the mechanism of the peaceful transfer of power to others is removed, individual corruption and megalomania takes over. Surrounding the dictators is a class of people, usually the armed forces, who are given privileges of status and money, so it becomes in their interest to keep the despots in power. All the other people in these countries then count for little. What democratic government would have refused help for the tens of thousands of people made homeless and drowned in the recent floods of the Irrawaddy delta? What true leader would have denied that his people were suffering from cholera when they were dying in their thousands all over Zimbabwe and when the country is on the brink of collapse seeks to spend lavishly on his birthday celebrations? I am proud of our values that see the purpose of a career in politics as trying to make a difference to improve the lives of others and the courage of Morgan Tsvangirai who has finally become Prime Minister of Zimbabwe after years of oppression is an example to us all. We must watch and wait for events to unfold and help when we can to make a difference. A change of leader alone is not enough because of the powerful cliques that will remain in power. Eventually they will give up when they see no future for themselves. This is what happened in Albania. We will not see revolution in either Burma or Zimbabwe because the people are too poor, too sick and starving or they have fled elsewhere.

**TIBET:** When I first met the Dalai Lama in October 2007, he spent most of the time telling me and my four fellow MPs that he was no longer looking for independence for Tibet.

After nearly half a century of occupation by China, Tibet is unlikely to ever become a separate sovereign nation again, at least not for a long, long time. His Holiness recognises this and so his main priority now is to ensure that Tibetan culture and language, and the Buddhist faith, survives. That's why he says that he wants to see true autonomy as part of China, but a real autonomous region where self-government and the preservation of what Tibetans really hold sacred is allowed to continue. China, says the Dalai Lama, is welcome to keep its troops stationed on Tibetan soil. After all, "we weren't very good at fighting or at running an army, which is why they were able to invade us so easily". Now, though, it's time to move on and decide what is really important to Tibetans, he says. "And their food is much better than ours", he adds with a laugh.

I agree. It is so vital to preserve the wonderful culture, language and traditions of Tibetans whilst recognising that the country is now in the 21st century. Tibetans should, however, be free from violence and repression which appears to be the hallmark of the Chinese Communist State in this supposedly autonomous region of China. Our role in the UK, as a nation with a historic link to Tibet - we once tried to invade it ourselves and failed - should be to stop human rights abuses and ensure that Tibetans enjoy true self-determination. Having visited Tibet myself in 2006, I will never stop supporting their cause.

### **KEEPING IN TOUCH**

For up to date news of my work in the constituency and at Westminster please visit my web site at

[www.leedsne.co.uk](http://www.leedsne.co.uk)